

# stump the pastor

*Q: John 20:22 says that Jesus “breathed the Holy Spirit” on his disciples on Easter evening, but Acts 2 says the Holy Spirit was not sent until Pentecost, 40 days after Easter. Which is right?*

*A: What a great question that shows very careful reading of the Bible! New Testament scholars have not settled on any one answer to it. Some suggest that John’s sources did not include the whole account of Pentecost, so he was simply unaware of it. Others respond that Pentecost was too well known—and too carefully described in Acts—for John *not* to have known about it! Some contend that Luke took a simple account of Jesus giving the Holy Spirit and expanded it into his full account of Pentecost. A fourth option is that John knew the same story Luke did, but wrote only his abbreviated account as a kind of summary version. All of those are plausible. None of them is definitive.*

Factual discrepancies like this fascinate modern scholars and readers. People today focus mainly on facts, and generally equate facts with the truth. When there are two different versions of an event, our first instinct is to investigate to determine which one is “right” or “the truth.”

Ancient historians thought differently. They usually had only limited source material and few research options. They did not equate truth with facts, but related the facts as best they could in order to illustrate the larger truth of an event. They did not value precise accuracy on finer details. (In many cases, the Bible sets two slightly different versions of the same event side-by-side, with no effort to reconcile them or choose between them. The two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 are a classic example.) What ancient authors prized was the *truth* of their message. They were more interested in what an event *meant* than in precisely *how* it happened.

Given that, common factors shared by different accounts are more significant than any discrepancies between them. The common factors are the “root story” of an event that was remembered and told to others. In this case, the common factors are 1) that Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, 2) that he sent the Spirit just as promised, 3) that the Spirit was not sent until Jesus had died and risen again, and 4) that the power of the Holy Spirit transformed fearful disciples into fearless apostles. Those are the heart of the story in John and Luke, and they relate exactly the same *truth*, even though their facts differ.